

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

In dark days of winter, seek glimmers of light



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The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah began at sundown Tuesday and concludes Wednesday. Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the temple following the defeat of the Syrian occupation in the second century BCE. The menorah was to be lit again, but there was only enough oil for one day, and yet the flame continued for eight days. This miracle led to Hanukkah being called the Festival of Lights. Thus, during the holiday an additional candle is lit each day in the menorah until all are burning on the eighth day.

Christians also mark the season by lighting an additional candle each of the four Sundays of Advent. Light is such an important part of these celebrations, in part because of the time of year, winter solstice, when daylight is the shortest in the Northern Hemisphere.

Celebrating Christmas on Dec. 25 has no basis in the biblical stories, but likely goes back to the popular Roman festival of light called Saturnalia, honoring the deity Saturn, which was celebrated during this time of year for centuries before. When Christianity became the state religion in the fourth century, this most popular festival was

incorporated into a celebration of the birth of Christ. After all, it fit in with other Christian themes, as when Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) In the Sermon on the Mount he said to his followers, "You are the light of the world."

Other religions recognize the importance of light in their holidays. In the Hindu, Sikh, and other dharma traditions, the celebration of Diwali is also considered a Festival of Lights. It represents the victory of light over darkness, good over evil and hope over despair. During these dark days of the year this theme of light can be a time of renewal, expectation, and hope. While this time of the year is marked by shorter days and increased darkness, we are also aware of what seems to be an increasing darkness in our world and nation. Anti-Semitism and hate crimes are on the rise in our country while tensions and violence between ethnic and religious groups around the world are prevalent in each day's news.

Sometimes it is hard to see the light when harassment, abuse, bullying and demonizing the opponent seem to be the standards of the day. Morality is no longer the expectation as long as my side wins. We are drifting further apart into the so-called

"echo chambers" that put the blame on the "other." Instead of finding ways to work together, everything is put in terms of "us and them."

CREATE A HOLY SPACE

In the current issue of Christian Century, M. Craig Barnes, the president of Princeton Theological Seminary, writes about the need to rediscover the virtue of gentleness:

"In these days of intense factionalism and demonizing partisanship, few of us are aspiring to gentleness. ... We think about the 'them' who are to blame for our problems. ... The harsh reality is that since the day Cain rose up against Abel, we have never been as careful with each other as we were created to be. The Bible's first story of life outside paradise is about violent conflict between brothers, and we haven't done much to improve on the plot."

Barnes cites Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, who "claimed that when God's creatures come together, a holy space is created between them. It is in this realm that they can always find the Creator still at work. If they leave their relationships, they also leave behind that holy space."

While it does seem that the news is quick to report the negative, could it be because it is not the usual? Most of life is not violent. As

someone pointed out, you never read about an airline landing safely; it's the unusual that makes the news. We really can't blame the media, because they are reporting what we want to hear. The public seeks violence in its movies and television, and if that's not enough we spend money on violent video games.

But we can still look for and find glimmers of light. The same issue of Christian Century also reported that the travel guru Rick Steves had in 2005 purchased a 24-unit apartment complex in the state of Washington and renovated it to provide rent-free housing for women who were in danger of becoming homeless because of abuse or drug addiction. He had been working with the local YWCA, which had helped him in providing services. He had planned to will it to the organization but instead gave it to them outright.

In these dark days, let us seek such glimmers of light and come together from our various traditions to celebrate the light and seek the holy spaces in our relationships. Whatever your tradition, in this dark season of the year, it is certainly a time to seek the light of goodwill to all, peace on Earth and respect and dignity for all persons.

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